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## THE SANITY OF HAMLET

*Pol.* What follows then, my lord?

*Ham.* Why, as *By lot, God wot*—and then you know—

“**W**HETHER Plato died in a dream, as some deliver, he must rise again to inform us.” The question of the madness of Hamlet, whether it was real or feigned, has the same and greater difficulties in the way of its solution. His own testimony could not be regarded as conclusive—for, if he were truly mad, we could hardly accept his word for it; while if he seemed mad merely, we could hardly believe a present protestation that the appearance was all a sham.

The learned Doctor Johnson remarks, “Of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity,” while the wiser Coleridge finds in the play evidence of “Shakespeare’s deep and accurate science in mental philosophy.” The latter believes that Hamlet shows the effect of an over-balance of contemplative faculty. “His thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions;” there is “a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it. . . . This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment:—Hamlet is brave and careless of death, but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve.”

The young intellectual, sorrowing for the death of his father, very naturally developed a psychosis under the influence of his mother’s unseemly second marriage. He became peevish. As he was not a valorous fighting man, his peevishness did not show itself in a pugnacious irritability. As he was neither narrow-minded nor a devotee of wine and sensual pleasure, he did not choose the ascetic mode of self-denial nor wander in the primrose path of reckless dalliance. Being simply a thinking man, he took to logic-chopping—and set up about himself a barricade of rigorous thinking behind which he was free to pursue his own reflections.

One can not be too logical in this world and continue to carry on his social functions. Such procedure is permitted only to small children who are not yet old enough to have learned that logic is strong medicine not to be taken too freely for the ills of every day, to old persons who are willing to accept the name of being peevish, and to unpleasant characters in fairy tales. It is the method of

those whom Alice finds so annoying in her encounters in Wonderland. If Hamlet was really mad, his psychosis was that of an intellectual, a hypertrophy of that inner eye whose function it is to perceive meanings, relations and implications; while if he was only feigning his insanity, then he did it by taking things too strictly, too literally, by a general social perverseness manifested in a desire to quibble and split hairs. His madness, whether real or feigned, was an excess of sanity. A Greek name for the psychosis would resolve the paradox.

A little logic is a dangerous thing. A naïve acceptance of things at their face value without an understanding of their usual purport and broader significance is an indication of lack of experience. When Alice failed to understand a remark of Humpty Dumpty and said "I beg your pardon," he replied "I'm not offended"—which was reasonable enough. He was simple, but good-natured. When she asked him, "Why do you sit out here all alone?" it did not occur to him that she assumed the gregarious instinct and he replied, "Why, because there's nobody with me! Did you think I didn't know the answer to *that*? Ask another." After more conversation of a similar sort, Alice walked quietly away, and she couldn't help saying to herself as she went "Of all the unsatisfactory people I *ever* met—." Undoubtedly she recognized in Humpty Dumpty the feeble-mindedness of arrested development.

Humpty Dumpty's insistence upon the strictly logical attributes of things was evidence merely that he had the clear-seeing eye of a simple child. But let an older person, mature beyond the imputation of childishness, such as Hamlet was, show fondness for such an insistence, and the social world regards him as peevish and irritable. Indeed, an excess of sanity is socially unreasonable.

A gushing young visitor at Niagara Falls remarked, "Oh, isn't it wonderful, all that water falling that way," and an Irishman who happened to be a member of the party of tourists responded, "Well, what's to prevent it?" The Irishman ceased to be a desirable member of the party, and the young lady's feelings were wounded because she supposed that the Irishman had been annoyed by her burst of (not very logically expressed) enthusiasm. Doubtless the Irishman was annoyed, and doubtless Hamlet was annoyed by the garrulity of Polonius. Each reacted similarly to the annoyance, and each showed his feelings in a logical fashion.

What could be more reasonable than the reply of "Words, words, words" which Hamlet makes when Polonius asks him what he is reading? and what could tend less to encourage further conversation? What could be ruder, or more logical, than Hamlet's

reply when Polonius offers to take leave of him?—"You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal, except my life, except my life, except my life."

At another time when Polonius and Hamlet are exchanging banter, Polonius is made to say "If you call me Jephtha, my lord, I have a daughter, that I love passing well," and Hamlet jumps upon him with the retort, "Nay, that follows not." There is no implication there. Whether he is called Jephtha or not, he has a daughter just the same. The one has nothing to do with the other. They are logically independent. And this is our clue to the character of Hamlet. Throughout the play he is the alert intellectual splitter of hairs. To his friends, when he wishes to be agreeable, his hair-splitting is pleasant banter: to the others, when he chooses to be reserved, it appears as a barrier behind which he hides his thoughts and motives.

When Hamlet learns from the ghost the story of his father's murder, everyone, abruptly and for the time, ceases to be his friend. Until he shall decide upon a course of action he will trust no one. Horatio and Marcellus question him for news, but he decides to keep his thoughts to himself. He swears them to secrecy and then informs them gravely that "There's ne'er a villain, dwelling in all Denmark, but he's an arrant knave," a logical proposition true on the face of it. Horatio objects that no ghost need come from the grave to tell them that, and Hamlet cheerfully agrees—"Why right; you are i' the right: and so without more circumstance at all, I hold it fit, that we shake hands, and part." Hamlet's manner of dealing with his questioners is reasonable enough. He asserts a truth beyond which there is no question—*as does the father who is embarrassed by the question of his son*, "What is that for?" and replies "Why that is something to make little boys ask questions." Any pragmatist will agree that the reply is profoundly philosophical and true—and like Truth it brings an end to the discussion.

Hamlet is constantly aware of his own mental processes. More than that, he is aware that he is constantly watching them. He is in the position of the professional philosopher who criticizes his thoughts while he is thinking them—and confesses it when he reasons in his great soliloquy, "and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." This he thinks is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but he reviews his logic and concludes that sleep is not a premise from which the absence of dreams may be inferred. And the consideration of dreams which may come perchance in the sleep of death must give us pause.

From sleep and death he refuses to draw the inference of absolute non-being. The minds which have evolved the Occidental religions have made the same refusal. Hamlet has here reasoned to the central problem of metaphysics, but he reasons critically and refuses the leap to the rash and unwarranted conclusion which is the *cul de sac* of the mystics.

When Indra in the Hindu mythology seeks instruction from Prajapati as to the nature of the Self, he is informed that "He who moves about happy in his dreams, he is the self, this is the immortal, the fearless, this is Brahman." And he goes away satisfied in his heart. But the satisfaction is not for long, for it occurs to Indra that the happy dreamers might possibly change and might have bad dreams. He returns to Prajapati and objects, "Sir, although it is true that that self is not blind even if the body is blind, nor lame, if the body is lame, though it is true that that self is not rendered faulty by the faults of the body, nor struck when the body is struck, nor lamed when it is lamed, yet it is as if they struck the self in dreams, as if they chased him. He becomes even conscious, as it were, of pain, and sheds tears. Therefore I see no good in this." After he has lived with Prajapati for a time, Indra is enlightened further with respect to the self—"When a man, being asleep, reposing, and at perfect rest, sees no dream, that is the Self, this is the immortal, the fearless, this is Brahman." Thereupon he goes away satisfied in his heart, but the satisfaction again does not last for long. He returns to Prajapati, bringing fuel in his hands as is the custom with students, and objects regarding the dreamless sleeper, "In truth he thus does not know himself that he is I, nor does he know anything that exists. He is gone to utter annihilation. I see no good in this." Prajapati replies with many words to the effect that the Self is the mind, but the involved explanation is not convincing, and Indra softly and silently vanishes away and never is met with again in the myth.

Hamlet is well aware of these considerations which Prajapati brings forward in an effort to meet the objections of Indra. He knows also—as we suspect that Prajapati did—that they are inadequate to meet the situation. He says that there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. He could be bounded in a nutshell and count himself king of infinite space were it not that he had bad dreams. Indeed he is fully conscious of the crux at the center of metaphysics. At one time he seeks in his reflections a guide for his conduct, at another he finds in them basis for banter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

One of his conversations with these two friends is devoted for a considerable time exclusively to entertaining logic-chopping. He shows them, as he shows Horatio at another time when the dust of Alexander is under discussion, that he delights in the exercise of the syllogism. He shows them also that he understands that a false proposition implies any proposition, for one of them asserts that there's no news "but that the world's grown honest," and he replies "Then is doomsday near: but your news is not true." Not satisfied then with drawing the first inference at hand from the asserted false proposition, he goes farther and himself asserts a proposition which his friends take to be false—that "Denmark's a prison"—but which he himself defends as true, thus leading them away to one of the central problems of philosophy, to the question of the subjectivity of judgments of value. "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Logicians still debate whether a false proposition implies any proposition or not. Hamlet knew long ago that it does. And the matter is really not one for debate anyway—for the question is one of fact, whether a false proposition functions this way in our actual thinking. Everyone who uses profanity knows consciously or unconsciously that it does. Logicians are only conscious thinkers critical of their own thinking processes, and one of them may readily be imagined who would be willing to be damned if a false proposition does not imply any proposition. The author of the present writing is a Hottentot if it doesn't.

If Logic is regarded as a natural and objective science having for its duty the study of the relations which naturally arise between the propositions which linked together constitute thinking, then the drama of Hamlet is a most fertile source of raw material. For Hamlet thought more clearly than most men. He was aware of the essential principles of logic and used them consciously. He used them excessively: that was his madness.

Actuated by motives probably intermediate between those of the artist and those of the professional peddler of mystery, Poe wrote that "the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence—whether much that is glorious—whether all that is profound—does not spring from disease of thought—from *moods* of mind exalted at the expense of general intellect." Sir Francis Galton, founder of the science of eugenics, cool-headed inquirer into things as they are, has an almost parallel passage. "Great men may be even indebted to touches of madness for their greatness; the ideas by which they are haunted, and to whose pursuit they devote themselves, and by which they rise to

eminence, having much in common with the monomania of insanity."

We can not know truly whether Hamlet was mad or not. But we can describe his symptoms and define his psychosis. He appears to have had an over-fondness for logic. When he was craziest he used it most. In his maddest moments he seems to have been the coolest and most sane. "Though this be madness," as the garrulous and meddlesome but after all very wise Polonius remarked, "yet there's method in't." The method is a denial of the social compromise. Much logic is a splendid barricade.

TENNEY L. DAVIS.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY.

### REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS OF LITERATURE

*Mind-Energy.* HENRI BERGSON. Translated by WILDON CARR. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1920. Pp. x + 262.

The philosophy of Bergson has had the fortune of producing a wide range of reactions. His philosophy has had an appeal surpassing the limits of the academic world and transcending the group of technical students of philosophy and even of science. Even within the academic world, acquaintance with his work has not been confined to the philosophers. Largely owing to the vitalistic controversy, the biologists have read Bergson. According to their several dispositions and convictions, they have applauded him, have remained indifferent, or have been repelled by him. Perhaps Bergson's position in the eyes of the specialists, of other than philosophical fields, who have found his doctrine congenial is due primarily to the utility of his work for purposes of vitalistic apologetics. Again, theologians have found him acceptable or unacceptable—but at any rate, many have read his books. Beyond the academic circle, his philosophical fortunes have again been varied. In some groups, his doctrines have been a fashion. With others it has had a serious, if diffused, meaning for their personal views on life. Finally, it seems that certain writers whose social views are called radical by the newspapers, have grounded their doctrine upon Bergsonian ideas as a metaphysical basis.

There are several reasons for this extension of influence. It is unnecessary to dwell upon stylistic attractions. A deeper reason can be gathered by noting the points at which this philosophy makes its contact with the lay mind. If such a manner of statement be permissible, it might be said that the doctrine is up-to-date. It is noteworthy that *Creative Evolution* has been far more widely read than *Matter and Memory* and *Time and Free Will*. In com-